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ABSTRACT

Within the paradigm of cultural pluralism, four areas seem worth exploring in depth: (1) language and power; (2) multiculturalism vs/as cultural pluralism; (3) English itself--the discipline, course, and class; and (4) individual vs/as the collective. Language and power include the primary paradox facing the English teaching profession, that in a fundamental way it is the teachers' assignment and mission to help people gain access to, and skill in, new languages, while avoiding stigmatizing preexisting dialects and languages as inferior. Distinguishing different manners of rejecting cultural hegemony is important, as seen in the differentiation of multiculturalism--a passive respect for other cultures--with cultural pluralism--an active engagement between differing cultures, ethnicities, abilities, and beliefs. In defining English as a discipline, it is important to identify what is being studied; beyond print, texts may include oral language, cultural forms, the media, and communication available through computer networks. Finally, instructors need to explore the extent to which the individual and the communities in which the individual exists can be seen as separable ideas. (EF)

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Cultural Pluralism for a Democratic Society.

IFTE 1995:Some Notes from a Subgroup

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Russ Hunt

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[*Note: this document was first assembled by the subgroup listed above, but has been extensively reshaped since. Russ Hunt should be held responsible for any misrepresentation of the views of the group, and of course for anything really stupid that's said here.*]

SEPTIMUS: I teach the classical authors. If I do not elucidate their meaning, who will?
BRICE: As her tutor you have a duty to keep her in ignorance.

-- Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*

Some context

Our small group agreed that the following was our understanding of the agreement on the four general areas that seemed worth exploring at some length. The slogans we identified them by were: (1) Language and Power, (2) Multiculturalism vs/as Cultural Pluralism; (3) English itself -- the discipline, the course, the class; (4) individual vs/as the collectivity. In a preliminary way, we expanded these in the following areas:

1. Language and power included the fundamental paradox facing our profession, that in a fundamental way it is our assignment, and our mission, to help people gain access to, and skill in, new languages. These new languages include the dialects of power in our societies, the languages of acceptance into new and important groups, the new languages of literacy and academic literacy (and academic orality), the new forms such as computers, the media, and so forth. At the same time we need to avoid stigmatising their pre-existing dialects, creoles, languages, and generic practices as inferior. Even more, we need to avoid contributing to the preservation and growth of a society in which linguistic characteristics are signals of inferiority or incapacity, and in which some groups are in fact kept in less powerful and more marginalized situations, such that to speak their dialects or languages in public is to brand you as a

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member of a disenfranchised and marginalized group.

2. It's important to distinguish between different ways of rejecting the practice of establishing cultural hegemony by tossing everyone into the melting pot of the dominant culture. We would propose to differentiate between "multiculturalism" on the one hand -- which seems to have become a kind of passive respect for (and largely ceremonial celebration of) people's ethnic differences -- and, on the other, cultural pluralism -- which we would argue means a much more active engagement not only between different cultures and ethnicities, but between groups characterized by differing religious beliefs and practices, physical and mental abilities, sexual preferences, and so forth.
3. In considering what "English" as a discipline, or an area of study, or as a classroom subject, we need to think about what it is that we study -- "texts," for instance, may mean not only print, and not only literature, but oral language, cultural forms, the media, the various forms of text and communication available through computer networks, and so forth. But perhaps equally significant, it means we need to think about its relations to other areas of study, both conceptually (what happens when English becomes combined with other disciplines in interdisciplinary courses or programs? How do "writing across the curriculum" programs affect what English is and who's teaching it in what circumstances?) and more practically and mechanically (is a designated set of hours per week in "English class," or courses organized as 10, or 13 or 16 week units, a reasonable framework in which to address the issues and provide the opportunities that we think important?)
4. One of the most important flashpoints of the public attack on our profession and on the kinds of educational practice which it seems we would agree are important has been the charge that the sorts of practice we increasingly embrace as a profession have the result of subjecting the individual to the community, of elevating consensus, "dumbing down," and the lowest common denominator to ways of life. We need to explore -- and find ways to talk about -- the question of the extent to which individual and the communities in which the individual exists can be seen as separable ideas.

Audience

Our subgroup -- Jesse Perry, Jane Isenberg, Graham Little, Sally-Anne Milgrim, Russ Hunt and Louise Rosenblatt -- decided that it was a first priority to decide to whom it was most important, and useful, to address ourselves in considering these questions, and to what end. Who would be an appropriate audience if we are not to be seen as (or, indeed, to *be*) responding on a catch-up, *ad hoc* basis to random attacks by members of the media. It's important to remember that there is no "general public"; there are fragmented and various overlapping audiences. *Our* appropriate audience would seem to be our "clients" -- parents, families, our students -- the people who are most immediately in a position to see themselves as having, already, important interests in common. It is the constituency of the school, in other words, which represents the audience whom we are most likely to influence and the one which is most likely to influence events.

And it's important to remember, too, that it's often the case that to the extent that these

people see themselves as members of that constituency, they tend to think of schools and schooling as okay -- it's the more general institution that they think of when they read the media reports about how schools are serving our kids so badly. Most people feel much more positively about their own school and their own kids' experiences there than they do about education generally, about the way schools in general serve a whole nation's kids in the abstract.

On the other hand, we'd better not forget that our fairly naive and perhaps a bit nostalgic model of the families our students come from -- mom and dad sending the kindergartener off for her first experience, or delivering the first year university student to campus in the family Buick -- are less and less relevant to reality. There aren't many of those unfragmented nuclear families out there, and when we write to this constituency we'd better remember that. Similarly, it's not true that *all* families think that their own kids are being well served by the public schools: there are sufficient numbers of people out there who see the schools as damaging or corrupting their kids, dumbing them down or labelling them as failures, that we'd better not write as though we already had, and deserved, everyone's good will.

In order to make this audience part of our discourse community, we need to make them part of our social community. In other words, in the long run the very nature of the school as a social institution needs to be changed. This is true not primarily because we need to have a useful rhetorical audience and situation, but because in order to make education work in society, the schools have to become something other than what they've been. Our view is that our educational institutions should also become community centers, where parents and community feel they have a stake and purposes and are welcomed.

Language, power, and audience

When we talk to this audience about issues of language and power we need to stress the importance of the language the student brings with her -- and the importance of working against the tendency to allow that language to become a badge of inferiority. It's important, too, to make clear that there's a continuity between accent, dialect, creole and language as badges of group membership. In principle and in practice there's not much difference between being a native speaker of a different language and having an accent or set of usages that brands you a member of a group. Although in Australia there is no tradition of accents which mark groups as disadvantaged, for instance, the immigrant who doesn't learn English and doesn't want to is clearly handicapped by this unwillingness or inability just as those who don't learn the "dominant dialect" in Britain or North America will find *this* a handicap.

Of course, however, this immediately raises the issues of "assimilation" and colonisation. Further, this becomes even more complicated issue when we consider what a culturally pluralistic society might look like. It's all very well to say that we need to respect people's free choices, but we have to consider the extent to which we have a responsibility to ensure that what we're dealing with actually is a "free choice" -- if there is such a thing. Can the urban families who might exercise the options made available by the voucher system, but don't because they really have no idea what's involved or because there *is* no family to make

the decision, be said to have had a choice in their children's education? Can the families who opt not to put their children in French immersion classes in Canada, and who therefore not only make it less likely that their kids will be employable, but also, as it happens, wind up simultaneously making the decision to put their kids in the "lower class" stream, be said to have made free choices when it's clear that that choice is a function of their position in society, and the result of making the choice available turns out to be an extremely effective system of streaming or tracking learners into pre-professional and pre-unemployment classes?

Further, helping learners learn to "code-switch" can be seen as a reinforcement of the position of the dominant culture. Does this mean we shouldn't do this, because we can be taken to be doing what traditional "language-police" teachers did? Let's face it, code switching is palliative care. Because it's no cure should we not do it?

Melting pots

What about the cases where there really *are* conflicts between cultural values? Ones that can't be solved merely by "toleration" (for instance, societies where toleration itself is not an absolute value, or where values violate the values of another society on a profound level -- regarding treatment of children, for instance, or women). Is our vision of a pluralistic, accepting society really no more than a fantasy? If that's the case, how to do allow for discourse to survive across these often violent cultural divisions. (Is this Jerry Graff's "teaching the conflict"? Does this give us occasions to model getting along with conflict?)

We don't want learners in our classes to be hurt in these conflicts, so we need sanctions to impose rules like "everyone shall be respected." But it's clear that people will be hurt anyway. How about systemic hurting? What about the marginalization of the people in the class whose participation in discussion is limited by personal or cultural or ethnic or linguistic factors?

We need to explore ways of making dialogue the center of the learning process. We need to recognize that language groups of *all* kinds are ways of creating and maintaining social groups and social relations, and that it's *never* defensible to stigmatize some language structures as inferior. They are games you play with the same cards -- the linguistic markers. But they're different games, have different rules and different power structures. Our job as teachers of language is to help people learn to learn how to adjust to different rules, to play the different games. We can do that best by giving them opportunities to engage in dialogue, and helping them learn how to do that, particularly by means of written text.

Language police

Historically, English teachers are the language police. In our perfectly reasonable desire to stop carrying out that prison-guard function, paradoxically, we've crippled ourselves. Isn't it more reasonable to see ourselves as having the role of helping students learn how to learn how to move into new linguistically defined groups -- to manipulate new accents, new

genres, new vocabularies and syntaxes as they need to participate on equal terms in new linguistically defined groups. Here's where the issue of "standards" comes in. Standards are the tool of the language and the culture police: the only place standards can arise is in a particular game -- you can have standards in poker or pinochle, but it's a much more complex issue to teach people how to learn to play many games. What role do "standards" play there?

This is connected closely to the issue of what "English" is. It isn't what bureaucrats and politicians who are imposing national curricula and standards, and appointing us the language and culture police, believe it is. It isn't that, even though calling it "English" invites that misconception. We need a new name, perhaps, but there is no obvious alternative in sight.

Another crippling historical survival is our focus on "authentic voice." If we abandon the idea that there is such a thing as authentic voice, if we say there are *only* voices which occupy positions in linguistic communities, we can make an easier defense of the ethics of code switching. You're not pandering or compromising when you speak to the academic group in the academic code, even though your "roots" are in the Miramichi or the Caribbean or the Black English Vernacular.

Of course we're also faced with the sheer fact that the relations between groups *are* unequal. Moving from the dialect of a Newfoundland outport or an aboriginal settlement to the English of the executive suite or the faculty room *is* moving "up," however little we like it. This is not a problem that can he solved in the classroom, or even in the staffroom.

The location of this discussion, then, is inappropriate to the larger problem, which is a political and social one, not one that can be addressed in the classroom. (Is this a quietistic position?)

We need to stress the importance of dialogue as a teaching strategy here, to emphasize how authentic transactions can function as a powerful way of learning -- as opposed to the transmission of information and the imposition of standards. It is only through cultural pluralism that we can actually *get* to the kind of learning how to learn to use language which is our goal. To define competence as the meeting of standards is to relegate the learner to unilingual isolation.

Technologies

It is important to recognize that there are ways in which the technologies we regularly use in teaching -- the photocopier and the computer, as well as the printed book and the overhead projector or blackboard -- can foster monologue, the imposition of one voice and one set of ideas and cultural practices on others, or they can foster dialogue, the transformative exchange of ideas, cultural practices, texts, intentions, and so forth. We need to be clear that it is not enough simply to make such technology available (though this is clearly important, and we do not wish to ignore the extent to which sheer accessibility is a way in which some

groups are marginalized). These technologies constitute tools which can be used in quite different ways. We need to make sure that their potential for putting people in touch with each other -- and, perhaps most important, for putting people in touch with each other through the medium of text (which is, of course, our stock in trade), is realized and not put at the service of those who would use them to impose one culture and one discourse on a whole diverse society. The information highway is not full of information, it's full of people.

Equally important, it's full of text, and will remain so. We are, after all, the people of the text. This is the arena in which our abilities are most relevant, our skills and traditions most useful. We should be taking a position, defining a role, here. We need to make sure that the potential of these tools is not used to marginalize us -- to create "distance education" programs where an isolated faculty member deals "efficiently" with faceless students in the isolation of a computer cubicle. The social nature of learning needs to be acknowledged, in the electronic context as much as the institutional and social ones.